

Mind, Matter, and Language

Lecture 9: Problems for Russell's Theory of Descriptions

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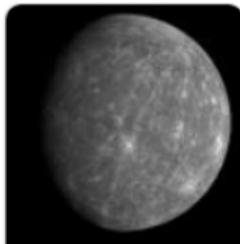
4 October 2019

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Review

Review

- We can use language to share information about the world.
- According to the referential approach, this is possible because we have conventions linking words and sequences of words to things in the world.



Mercury



Venus



Earth



Mars



Jupiter

One of many problems for the referential approach:

'The inventor of the lightning rod was born in Boston.'



The sentence doesn't (just) say that this guy was born in that place.

Russell: It says that there is a unique person who invented the lightning rod, and this person was born in Boston.

Russell's theory of descriptions

'The F is G ' means that there is an F that is G and there is no other F .

Problems for Russell's theory

Russell's theory of descriptions

'The F is G ' means that there is an F that is G and there is no other F .

How does 'the F is G ' come to have this meaning?

Russell: The **logical form** of 'the F is G ' is ' $\exists x(Fx \wedge \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x=y) \wedge Gx)$ '.

Objection: That's implausible.

Grammatically, 'the F ' seems to work like 'an F ', 'no F ', or 'every F '.

According to Russell, sentences containing these expressions have completely different logical forms.

Problems for Russell's theory

Another problem:

- (1) 'I closed the window.'
- (2) 'I saw the landlord in the coffee shop'.

According to Russell, these mean:

- (1a) There is exactly one window, and I closed it.
- (2a) There is exactly one landlord, and one coffee shop, and I saw the former in the latter.

But there are many windows, landlords, and coffee shops.

It does not follow that (1) and (2) are false.

Response: This might be an instance of a more general phenomenon.

- There is no more beer.
- Everyone came to the party.
- Most students passed the test.

Quantifiers in natural language are usually restricted to a contextually salient subset of the entire universe.

Problems for Russell's theory

- (1) 'I closed the window.'
- (1a) There is exactly one window, and I closed it.
- (1b) **Among the contextually salient things** there is exactly one window, and I closed it.

General norms of communication affect what is contextually salient.

One general norm is **charity: interpret other's utterances so that what you take them to say is reasonable.**

Suppose there are three windows in the room, one of which was open until recently.

(1) makes a reasonable claim only if the "contextually salient things" include just one window: the previously open one.

Problems for Russell's theory

We've discussed two problems:

- the problem of logical form
- the problem of non-unique descriptions

Next: Peter Strawson's objection.

Problems for Russell's theory

According to Russell, when you say 'the F is G ', you make three claims about the world:

1. There is at least one F .
2. There is at most one F .
3. That unique F is G .

Arguably, the first two conditions have a different status than the third.

1. The king of France is wise.
2. The inhabitant of London lives in Baker Street.
3. The current Prime Minister is trustworthy.

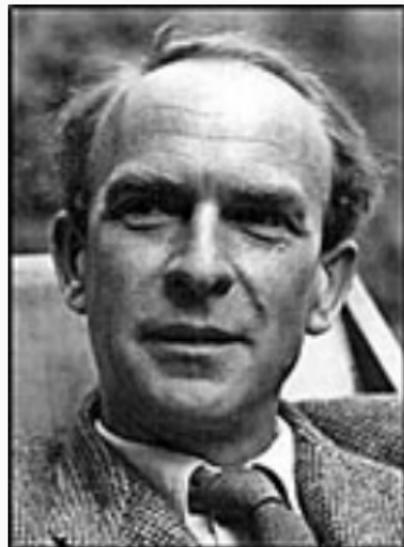
If the third condition fails, the sentence is simply false.

But if the others fail, the sentence seems **wrong** in some other way.

Problems for Russell's theory

Now suppose some one were in fact to say to you with a perfectly serious air: "The king of France is wise". Would you say "That's untrue"? I think it's quite certain that you wouldn't. But suppose he went on to ask you whether what he just said was true or was false [...]. I think you would be inclined, with some hesitation, to say that [...] the question of whether his statement was true or false simply didn't arise, because there was no such person as the king of France.

Strawson, "On Referring" (1950)



Strawson argues that

- 'The present king of France is wise' is neither true nor false.
- If you utter the sentence, you don't **assert** that there is a present king of France; you **presuppose** it.

What is **presupposition**?

When we utter a sentence in a conversational context, we usually assume that various things are common ground: known by every participant to the conversation.

'Bob stopped smoking' presupposes that Bob used to smoke, because the sentence should only be uttered if it is common ground that Bob used to smoke.

Presuppositions survive embeddings:

- Bob hasn't stopped smoking.
- I don't know if Bob has stopped smoking.

Problems for Russell's theory

Strawson suggests that 'the F is G ' presupposes that there is a unique F , but only asserts that this F is G .

Strawson's account explains why it is often odd to use 'the F ' in a conversation in which it isn't already known that there is a unique F .

- (1) I talked to the man drinking a martini.
- (2) There was a man drinking a martini; I talked to him.

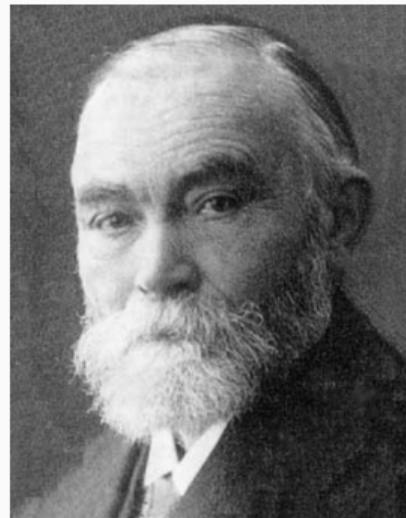
On Russell's account, there should be nothing wrong with (1).

Frege on descriptions

Frege on descriptions

'the negative square root of 4': We have here the case of a compound proper name constructed from the expression for a concept with the help of the singular definite article. This is at any rate permissible if the concept applies to one and only one object.

Frege, "On Sense and Reference" (1892)



'the window'

- 'window' refers to a "concept": a function from objects to truth-values.
- 'the window' refers to an object.
- So 'the' refers to a function from concepts to objects.
- When given a concept that applies to a single object, the function returns that object.
- For other concepts, the function returns nothing.

Frege on descriptions

- 'the present king of France' has no reference.
- 'The present king of France is bald' has no truth-value.
- 'The present king of France is not bald' has no truth-value.

That's just what Strawson wants to say.

Frege on descriptions

A problem for the Frege-Strawson account:

Some sentences containing empty descriptions seem clearly false (and their negation true).

- Boris Johnson is the king of France.
- I had dinner with the king of France last night.